

CHILD SUPPORT IN REVIEW – FY 2004

Office of Child Support Enforcement • Georgia Department of Human Resources

Director's Message

The Department of Human Resources Office of Child Support Enforcement proudly presents a report of our activities during FY 2004. Georgia not only remains in the national forefront in the collection of child support, but also continues to focus on the broader needs of children for safe, stable, nurturing homes.

The Child Support program serves nearly one fourth of all children under the age of 18 in Georgia. In spite of the budget cuts of the past year, we have been able to maintain our same high level of service and continue to improve in overall performance. The introduction of a debit card will speed payments to parents faster and save taxpayers several million dollars in costs formerly associated with paper checks. New online services give parents 24-hour-a-day access to their case. I am proud of the innovative efforts of Georgia's Office of Child Support Enforcement.

Highlighted topics in the FY2004 report include:

- A \$25 million increase in collections
- Protecting children by helping 430,500 custodial parents remain self-sufficient
- Innovative uses of technology to improve customer service and streamline the child support process, including introduction of a debit card and online services
- Protecting children by increasing the number of children with established paternity at birth through the Georgia Paternity Acknowledgement Program
- Helping over 2,500 non-custodial parents through the Georgia Fatherhood Services Network improve their abilities to pay their court-ordered child support

These accomplishments obviously reflect a staff dedicated to ensuring that children have the benefit of, at minimum, their parents' financial support and, at best, their parents' commitment of time, love, and guidance.

We wish to thank our many community partners who have contributed to focus on the broader needs of children for safe, stable, nurturing homes.

Robert Riddle
Director
Office of Child Support Enforcement



Supporting Our Children

All children need emotional and financial support from both their father and mother. Georgia's Child Support Enforcement program (OCSE) works to benefit children by enforcing the parental responsibility to pay financial support. This helps to promote and enhance family self-sufficiency and stability as well as reducing the public burden of supporting financially abandoned children. The child support services offered by 79 offices across Georgia help children receive the support they deserve.

Georgia distributed \$549 million in child support for the benefit of more than 516,000 children during FY2004. Almost one fourth of Georgia's children – 24 percent – are served by the Office of Child Support Enforcement.

During the year, OCSE expanded its use of technology with the Constituent Services Portal on the Georgia Department of Human Resources web site. This interactive web site allows customers with established cases with OCSE to obtain and update case information and obtain payment information. Additionally, OCSE replaced the use of paper checks with a debit card. Child Support payments are now made

using the debit card or by direct deposit.

Other innovative programs that OCSE continues to offer include specialized training for new and veteran staff, the In-Hospital Paternity Acknowledgement Program and the Child Access and Visitation Program for non-custodial parents who wish to visit their children. The Fatherhood Services Network continued to work with a variety of community and faith-based organizations that provide services that many Fatherhood participants need to overcome barriers such as substance abuse and criminal backgrounds.

Georgia is recognized as a national child support enforcement leader thanks to the commitment of people devoted to children, families and the child support program. Despite these efforts, many children are not receiving the support they need. We will continue to work to strengthen enforcement laws and enhance our services to collect more support for Georgia's children.

Please take the time to review this report for more specific information concerning our program.

Collecting Child Support

OCSE services are available to Georgia parents who need assistance. The custodial parent may apply at the OCSE office that serves their county. There is a one-time fee of \$25. The service is free to custodial parents who receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). The custodial parent is asked to furnish legal documents, if available, and information about the non-custodial parent.

Child Support Services Include:

- Locating non-custodial parents
- Establishing paternity
- Establishing and enforcing child support orders
- Establishing and enforcing medical support orders
- Collecting and distributing support payments

Collection and Enforcement Tools Available to OCSE:

- Withholding child support from paychecks or unemployment benefits
- Intercepting federal and/or state income tax refunds to pay child support arrears
- Garnishing worker's compensation benefits
- Reporting parents behind in child support payments to credit bureaus
- Suspending or revoking driver's, professional or occupational licenses for failure to pay child support
- Reviewing and modifying child support orders periodically
- Intercepting lottery winnings of more than \$5,000
- Filing contempt of court actions which may result in a jail sentence if the non-custodial parent is found in contempt of court
- Filing liens on tangible / intangible property
- Seizing matched bank accounts after notice



Georgia OCSE Collects \$1.5 Million a Day



Since its inception in 1973, OCSE has collected \$5.3 billion on behalf of children and families around the state. During the past year, collections topped \$549 million. That equates to just over \$1.5 million per calendar day for Georgia's children.

Much of this increase can be attributed to welfare reform, enforcement tools granted by the legislature in recent years, technology enhancements, privatization initiatives and the dedication and commitment of OCSE employees across the state.

- \$7.4 million was collected from intercepted state tax refunds
- \$30 million was collected from federal tax refunds
- \$3.2 million was collected from unemployment compensation benefits
- \$40,656 was collected from lottery winnings
- \$34.3 million was distributed to parents whose cases were not established by OCSE but whose payments are routed through the Financial Customer Service Unit

Demand for Services Increases:

- 24% of all children under 18 in Georgia have a case with OCSE
- Total caseload - 481,718 (up 41,700 cases)
- TANF caseload - 84,967 (up 4,700 cases)
- Non-TANF caseload - 396,751 (up 37,000 cases)
- Private child support cases (non-IV-D) - 16,531 (no change)
- Average agent caseload - 641 cases (up 53 cases)
- Cases with a support order - 344,308 (71.5 percent)
- Cases receiving a payment - 230,738 (67 percent)

During FY 2004:

- \$549,316,459 in child support was distributed
- Collections increased \$25 million over FY2003

Technology Expands Customer Access to OCSE Services

The service demands of child support customers continue to increase, resulting in more mail and telephone calls. Like many states, Georgia has a toll-free customer service number, but lacks the resources to adequately handle the 10.3 million calls processed in FY2004. Fortunately, technology is coming to the aid of many states, including Georgia, to help them deal with customer service issues.



payments and payment details, request copies of checks, request stop payment on checks, view case status, and update address and employer information through the portal.

In 2003, Georgia OCSE initiated a customer service tool called "Where's My Child's Check?" This enabled the agency to make information related to child support checks available through the Internet 24 hours a day, every day, making it easier to find out the status of the payments while preserving the privacy of personal information. The site averaged over 65,000 hits per month.

The project's success caused OCSE to decide to expand its online services. The new Constituent Services Portal Project offers services based on high-priority constituent needs discovered through a survey of 350 custodial and non-custodial parents. In addition, the team met with OCSE agents to understand the type of constituent services that would help them complete their jobs more efficiently and effectively.

The survey identified payment information as the highest priority constituent need. The Child Support Hotline estimates that approximately 40 percent of the calls received daily are about payment information. Custodial parents can now view

Release 2 and Release 3 focused primarily on case status information. This was the constituents' second

highest priority. The information provided includes upcoming appointment dates such as court dates or paternity test dates. Parents can view recent child support enforcement actions taken on their case such as license suspensions or liens. Additional services include online payment using a credit card or a debit card, direct deposit setup and cancellation, email customer service, as well as the ability to request case closure and to add or update non-custodial parent locate information. Release 4 enabled a mother or father to apply online for child support services.

The Constituent Services Portal Project makes child support payment information available 24 hours a day, every day, to custodial and non-custodial parents. Payment information is available without the inconvenience of busy telephone lines or visiting a local Child Support office. In this era of tight budgets and limited resources, OCSE is taking the lead in using technology to help their employees work more efficiently and their customers obtain services more easily. Citizens expect an immediate response to questions, services and processes. In Georgia, OCSE is the first state agency to utilize technology in this manner.

Family Support Registry Assures Timely Processing of Support



Welfare reform required the state to centralize its collection of child support payments at one location. OCSE created the Georgia Family Support Registry (FSR) to fulfill this requirement. Lockheed IMS was selected through competitive bids to serve as contractor for the project during FY 2004.

Most affected by this process are the state's 185,000 employers. They have cooperated fully with the Registry staff. To further improve services, the FSR offers employers the ability to send payments electronically or to provide the FSR with a listing of payments on a diskette.

During the past year of operation:

- 4.3 million items were processed
- \$495.1 million in support payments were processed
- \$68.2 million were processed by electronic funds transfer
- 2 million pieces of mail were processed

Debit Card and Direct Deposit Speed Delivery of Child Support Payments

During FY2004, OCSE began to eliminate the paper checks previously sent to custodial parents in order to improve the delivery of child support payments. After August 2004, all Georgia parents who receive child support received those funds either through direct deposit to their bank accounts or by using a new debit card, instead of a paper check. OCSE expects the new system to save several million dollars per year in postage, printing and administrative costs, speed up payments, and eliminate the inconvenience of checks lost, stolen or delayed in the mail.

Even under ideal conditions, checks took from three to ten days to arrive after the non-custodial parent or their employers submitted a payment. If the recipient had moved with no forwarding address, the check would be returned to OCSE. Over 13,700 checks were returned last year.

Now, payments arrive within 24 hours in the custodial parent's debit card or bank account. In addition, staff will no longer need to spend time replacing lost or stolen checks.

A pilot group of 17,500 Georgia parents began using the cards in May 2004. Almost 149,000 custodial parents have received the cards and over 120,000 of those cards have

been activated. The cards are provided through a contract with Affiliated Computer Services, Inc. Approximately 20 percent of OCSE's custodial parents selected direct deposit instead of the debit card. The same choices have been offered to DHR's own staff, most of who already receive their salaries through direct deposit.



Georgia is only the second state in the country to completely replace child support checks with debit cards and direct deposit, following Iowa's launching of a similar system in December 2003. Several other states have pilot programs. Georgia is the first state to eliminate paper checks for employees as well as child support recipients.

The cards, known as EPPICard™ MasterCard, can be used for a purchase – and in many cases a cash withdrawal – at any business that

accepts MasterCard debit cards, and for a withdrawal at any MasterCard bank and at any ATM with a MasterCard, Maestro or Cirrus logo. Parents will not have to pay any fees to use the EPPICard™ MasterCard, except for withdrawals from an ATM or at certain retailers. The cards feature a color photograph of the Cherokee rose, Georgia's state flower.

Child Support Hotline Enhances Customer Service



The OCSE Hotline began operation in 1986 with one line, to serve as a central point of information and a clearing-house for problem solving. Today, with 24 lines, the OCSE Hotline

handles more calls than any other hotline operating in Georgia state government.

In FY2004, the OCSE Hotline:

- Received 10,272,355 calls requesting automated payment information
- Allowed 120,643 callers to speak to an OCSE customer service specialist

- Enabled 144,621 callers to receive assistance from the Family Support Registry

Clients calling the OCSE Hotline may select the option of speaking to the Customer Service Unit. Twenty customer service specialists are available in the unit to answer questions or assist with problems.

The bulk of the questions received by the Customer Service Unit are for:

- Payment information
- Requests for enforcement

To access the OCSE Hotline in the 478, 706 or 912 area codes, call 800-227-7993. In the 404, 678, or 770 area codes (Metro Atlanta), call 404-463-8800.

The OCSE Hotline operates 24 hours a day, every day. The customer service specialists are available between 7:00 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. Monday – Friday except for state holidays.

Georgia Fatherhood Services Network Improves Parents' Ability to Pay Child Support

The Georgia Fatherhood Services Network, created by OCSE in 1997, works with non-custodial parents who are supposed to pay their child support through OCSE and are unable to pay. Gainful, stable employment enables these parents to provide regular financial support for their children. The program expanded statewide in November 1998.

The Fatherhood Program:

- Generally takes three months to complete
- Participants are required to work at least 20 hours per week while enrolled in the program
- Participants are required to pay child support during this time
- Upon completion of the program, participants receive assistance in obtaining full-time employment earning a wage that they can live on and pay their child support.

Many participants have barriers such as substance abuse problems or a criminal background that prevent them from maintaining employment. OCSE is not equipped to address these issues and has contracted with other agencies, educational institutions and community groups to provide the necessary services.



The Georgia Fatherhood Services Network is the largest state-operated fatherhood program in the country. Over 2,500 non-custodial parents received services through the network during the past year. Almost every state now offers some type of fatherhood program. However, Georgia is one of the few states where the services are offered in all areas of the state.

Access and Visitation Project Increases Support Payments

OCSE established the Child Access and Visitation Program to help non-custodial parents who want to visit with their children. The program provides non-legal services and intervention on behalf of the non-custodial parents referred to the program. The goal is to improve non-custodial parents' access to and visitation with their children.



Research has shown that parental contact is related to the payment of child support and that fathers' involvement improves children's development and self-esteem. In Georgia, according to a report by the U.S. Inspector General, 55 percent of all program participants increased the amount of support paid by an average of \$88 and 48 percent increased the frequency of payment.

To be eligible for the program, a non-custodial parent must have an active case with OCSE or MAXIMUS Child Support

Services. Income restrictions for receiving services vary with each project area.

Funding for the project comes from a grant from the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and from grant funds managed by the Georgia Department of Human Resources.

During FY2004, the Access and Visitation Program:

- Arranged 445 visitations
 - 424 visitations were successful
 - 21 visitations were unsuccessful
 - 312 were monitored visitations
 - 100 were supervised visitations
 - 12 neutral drop off/pick ups were arranged
- Developed 98 parenting plans
- Conducted 66 mediations
- Arranged 780 individual parenting sessions
- Allowed 702 parents to attend group parenting sessions

In-Hospital Paternity Acknowledgement Program Boosts Georgia's Paternity Establishment Rate

Georgia's In-Hospital Paternity Acknowledgement Program

Program has been very successful in improving its effectiveness during the past few years. OCSE contracted with Policy Studies, Inc. to provide training, technical assistance, quality assurance and public outreach to all birthing hospitals, state Vital Records, county Vital Records, registrars and probate judges in the state. The training has been a masterful collaboration of several DHR programs including the Office of Adoptions and the Division of Public Health's Vital Records Branch, Family Health Branch, Newborn Hearing and Metabolic screening programs, and Children 1st.

The program provides an opportunity for putative fathers and unwed mothers to acknowledge paternity at or near the time of the child's birth. Signing a voluntary paternity acknowl-



edgement allows a father to have his name placed on the child's birth certificate. This is especially important since research indicates that the earlier fathers become involved in the lives of their children, the better the chance there will be a connection and that it will last. Parents are advised of all of their rights and responsibilities prior to signing the voluntary paternity acknowledgement.

In Federal Fiscal Year 2003 (October 1, 2003 through September 30, 2004):

- 53,666 children were born to unwed parents in Georgia
- 68 percent signed a voluntary paternity acknowledgement
- The rate of paternity establishment has improved by 57 percent since the program began.

The increase has helped OCSE achieve its federally mandated paternity establishment goals. Paternity establishment is one of the OCSE program goals, in light of federal financial incentives for success and penalties for failure. The continued success of this program not only benefits the mothers, fathers and children, but also helps OCSE earn additional federal funds.

Child Support Enforcement Crosses State Boundaries

The most difficult child support cases to pursue are those in which the parent obligated to pay child support lives in one state and the child and custodial parent live in another. However, all states are required to pursue child support enforcement -- including location, paternity establishment, and establishment of obligations -- as vigorously for children who live outside their borders as for those under their own jurisdiction.

Georgia has 94,737 cases where one of the parties lives out of state. The majority of these cases are with states that border Georgia. The largest number of these cases involves a parent who lives in the State of Florida.

Under federal welfare reform mandates, all states enacted the Uniform Interstate Family Support Act (UIFSA) prior to January 1, 1998. The UIFSA law for Georgia is in code section 19-11-100.

UIFSA provides procedures for referring a case for action in another state. The laws can be used to establish paternity and to establish, modify or enforce a support order. Also, interstate wage withholding can be used to enforce a support order in another state if the non-custodial parent's employer is known.



Georgia and all other state child support enforcement agencies have an office called the Central Registry to receive incoming interstate child support cases, make sure that the information given is complete, send the case to the right local office and respond to inquiries from out-of-state child support offices.

The speed with which the case is enforced depends on the aggressiveness of the child

support agency in the state where the non-custodial parent lives, as well as the usual factors such as whether the non-custodial parent is located and employed and the court system in that jurisdiction.



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